

THE 2008 WORLD TEA EXPO, LAS VEGAS

BY NORA GUBINS

At some time or another, tea lovers are asked “How did you get interested in tea?” Often, after the declaration of always being interested in tea, or after some fond childhood reminiscence, a more thoughtful response unfolds.

Regretfully, I cannot claim decades of study, nor can I offer tales of grandmother’s tea table. I happened upon tea in avoidance of coffee. Coffee’s bitterness and spike of caffeine continually jolted me, so in a world that punctuates its meals and meetings with coffee, my polite decline of it paved the way for tea.

After years of drinking many cups steeped from tea bag fannings, I began to seek a better tea to share. During the search, I chanced upon a cooking workshop for “Afternoon Tea” and ignored the delicate sandwich recipes but was spellbound by the story of tea, so eagerly shared by the instructor. That began

my love affair; and not just with *Camellia Sinensis* but with her history, wares, fabulous tales and characters.

Fast forward a few years, and I have hungrily completed a tea “appreciation” certificate at a local community college (over 60 hours of study), joined the Tea Association of Canada and haunt the local tea shops of Toronto, of which there are too few.

At one of these shops, the proprietor casually mentioned the World Tea Expo (WTE) and I was intrigued. As a communications professional, I decided to converge my skill with words and my passion and knowledge of tea, and sign my company up to attend with the hope of finding ideas for an article and furthering my connoisseurship of tea. How could I resist a peek into the industry of my beloved tea?





Many in the tea world will know the WTE as an annual industry-only conference that features tea and tea-related products including: bulk, bagged and ready-to-drink teas; wholesale and packaging suppliers; tea giftware, and tea confectionary items.

Held in late May of this year, 4,632 people attended the nearly 60 seminars and visited the 284 exhibiting companies on the show room floor. Since its inception in 2003, the show has grown steadily and outgrown its Atlanta location and plans to be in Las Vegas for 2009 as well. This year it was held at the Mandalay Bay Conference Centre.

I sense the irony of being in the dry heat of the Nevada desert, yet surrounded by the luscious palms and tropical plants of the huge Mandalay Bay hotel. As with much of Las Vegas, the hotel's theme seems to be an ersatz version of great cities and civilizations of the world—in this case, of a romanticized Mandalay of Burma's yesteryear.

Having worked as a marketing executive, I'm used to professional trade shows and the WTE is no exception. Nothing ersatz in this production. All was well-organized and well laid out in an informative show guide. The expo clearly speaks to the industry and business of tea, and I found myself wondering how a tea lover would react to the variety of products on view. Coming from the world of professional services, and stepping into another sector is eye-opening, if not a bit bewildering.

I had to keep reminding myself that this is a trade show, not a consumer show. Surprisingly, very few booths actually offered any tea. Many booths had sample packets, and some scanned my delegate pass to “stay in touch”.



In addition to the booths, there was a long display of “winner” teas. At the Expo, the WTE organization launched the first comprehensive resource for rating characteristics for tea buyers through the first-ever World Tea Championship. All teas submitted received a World Tea Rating. This rating is intended to help elevate the perception of tea, and increase consumer awareness—much like the Parker Rating System did for the wine industry.

As the organizers of the WTE say, it's time the tea industry broke with the constant comparison with its distant cousin, coffee, and assumed its rightful place alongside its closer kindred, wine.

As I continued to trudge the aisles, my focus began to shift to the products involved with tea, rather than the revered drink itself. After all, it was about the

business of tea here, not just tea. In fact, after viewing some of the booths, one wonders what role tea actually plays. I found fizzy drinks made of green tea, tea candies, tea incense, tea movies, tea diets, tea lid permutations and even tea dental floss and a tea pot-shaped car. I was beginning to feel a bit awed at all the uses (and abuses?) of *Camellia Sinensis*.

The expo organizers grouped the exhibitors together based on their producing countries, and it is the foreign aisles that I found most satisfying to peruse. Perhaps it's my love of travel and enjoyment of learning about other cultures—another gift tea has given me. China was well-represented: Their growers displayed tea in a simple, almost homespun fashion, often with simple plates and hand written tags.



address the lifestyles of today: travelers, multi-tasking moms, execs seeking a better edge or athletes amping up their game. It was quite an alternative view of tea when compared to the many Victorian tea room suppliers I found at the expo.

Another alternative was found in a neighboring booth. I discovered a present day Anna of Bedford, the Duchess socialite credited with ‘inventing’ afternoon tea. At this exhibit, a polished salesman invited me to consider a tea franchise of sorts “as seen on Oprah!” In chatting with him further, I soon realized that this seemingly contemporary version of tea—part fashionista/part stylemaker—is really a jazzed-up version of Duchess Anna’s vision, had she had the chance to commoditize tea. I am in awe at the cunning use of tea by these people, who somehow align it with celebrities, charities and even with beauty products.

The next aisles featured other countries, and I must admit I found it exciting to meet growers and tasters from Sri Lanka, Kenya or India. I realized how small the global village really is when they immediately started discussing the Canadian ‘tea scene’. It’s quite fascinating to picture these people back in their respective locales, to which I feel now more connected by the few minutes of conversation about an awesome dried leaf.

The upcoming aisles moved me away from my romanticized tea gardens and into the hardcore world of the market place.

The next booth I spent time at was almost futuristic. It was so white, it gleamed and it was staffed by energetic twenty-somethings. This team seemed genuinely excited to be at the show. They were clad in pristine white athletic gear and virtually bouncing with energy while discussing their tea. It was hard to resist smiling as their enthusiasm was so contagious. We had a chat about how they were “positioning” their teas. They had blended many teas and tisanes to



I was also taken aback at the variety of delegates, their wares and presentation styles. It was truly fine to see them all under one roof, and I felt a bit humbled by all the possibilities this miraculous plant offers. However, I must confess that some of the booths left me feeling embarrassed about what we are doing to *Camellia Sinensis*.

I was so content to simply drink it—to share a cup with friends. Once I saw the potential of tea from its hungry commercial side, from processing to pedicures, I was intimidated. Like any exploited product, we are ravenous for more than its taste. Having briefly glimpsed the many profitable pathways, will my cup of tea ever taste the same again?

I left the show realizing the variety of people involved with tea actually echoes the variety within

our dear *Camellia Sinensis*.... Though we all stem from the same origin, some of us are withered a bit more, some are shiny and bright. Regretfully, we have our twisted sorts, yet thankfully there are always some that bloom.

The Leaf